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ABSTRACT

In the comprehension approach to second language instruction, the major procedure is to provide students with comprehensible input, which it is the students' responsibility to understand. The aim is to encourage nucleation of the target language, that is the crystallization of the rule system. Teaching procedures focus on strategies for implicit or nonconscious language learning. Speaking is not taught, but is expected to develop as the individual acquires knowledge of the language. The training includes prenucleation, nucleation, and postnucleation stages. The prenucleation stage provides for emotional and intellectual preparation; the nucleation stage provides for comprehension of complex sentences, abstract concepts, and vocabulary; and the postnucleation stage is concerned with the reduction of persistent speaking errors, increasing cultural information and understanding, teaching various writing styles, and teaching specialized vocabulary when needed. An experimental intensive German course taught by this method resulted in high achievement and motivation without explicit instruction in grammar or translation of vocabulary items. It is suggested that comprehension training should continue for 1000 hours to prepare students for literary reading and composition skills. (MSE)

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Teaching Language through Comprehension

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Straight[1] commented that "it wasn't until the '70s that a full-fledged 'comprehension approach' to language instruction emerged. . . . In the early '80s this approach has come to occupy a prominent though not yet dominant position in the field. . . ." The basic principles of the comprehension approach will be reviewed in this chapter, but its primary focus will be to detail procedures of teaching at the early, intermediate, and late stages of language training. In addition, the results of an investigation of college students learning German through the comprehension approach will be summarized.

Theoretical Considerations

In the comprehension approach, the major procedure of training is to provide students with comprehensible input. Students' sole responsibility is to understand the input. On the surface, this training procedure may appear simplistic: students are not held responsible for grammatical rules nor are they required to speak. It may seem to be a method that emphasizes one skill—listening—in that speaking, reading, and writing are not taught.

Comprehension training, however, does not ignore traditional aims of language instruction. Speaking, reading, and writing are important aspects of the comprehension approach, but these skills are not taught

according to traditional formats. The primary aim of the comprehension method is to encourage nucleation of the foreign language, at which point students will have sufficient knowledge to acquire the skills of speaking, reading, and writing.[2]

Nucleation, a term originally provided by Pike[3] to refer to crystallization or the learned organization of the rule system of a language, is a concept that cannot be easily illustrated. Nucleation refers to a specific point in the learner's acquisition of a language when seemingly independent parts fit together and form a logical and cohesive whole without the learner necessarily knowing why. Our working definition of nucleation is that it is when the language learner has fluent understanding of standard, nontechnical, conversational speech. We recognize, of course, that this working definition is not particularly easy to assess since language tests do not address this issue.

Nucleation does not always guarantee correct syntactic usage, nor does it imply that the learner has a vocabulary comparable to the average native speaker. Furthermore, the vocabulary items of the native speaker and the language learner do not necessarily share the same semantic space. Nucleation implies only that the language learner can follow conversation well, and can fill in or ask for clarification when a word or concept is not understood to produce near native comprehension. Nucleation means that the language learner understands more than the gist of a conversation. He or she is a fluent understander of the foreign language.

Prior to nucleation, students can talk, but they will not have command of complex structures and cannot carry on a conversation beyond that of describing elementary events. They will be unable to express concepts that involve emotion, opinion, reference, and explanation. Beginning students who use language rules well in a class for which the objective is to write syntactically correct sentences have not nucleated. They are unable to use rules correctly in conversation despite their frequently correct use of grammatical rules on written exercises. Subsequent to nucleation, individuals can make their intent understood, define concepts, and talk about abstract events, although errors of pronunciation, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics will continue.

Premises of the Comprehension Approach

The primary purpose of the comprehension approach is to enable students to achieve nucleation most effectively. Within this framework a second language is acquired through activities similar to that of a native language.[4] Native speakers formulate sentences without consciously editing output, a process Krashen calls *monitoring*.[5] Monitoring can usually be applied only to the most obvious syntactic structures. For this reason, students who utilize a grammatical approach to language learning can learn most of the customary 40 to 50 syntactic principles of beginning foreign language texts with some degree of success,[6] but they cannot apply them easily in speaking or listening.

The syntactic principles of generative grammars, which are not included in beginning foreign language texts[7] cannot be brought to conscious awareness easily. Also, semantic and pragmatic principles, and their interrelationship with syntactic principles are not easily accessible.

Conscious monitoring of output according to memorized paradigmatic routines may interfere with language acquisition. Several investigations support this position. First, students have difficulty using conscious and unconscious methods of instruction simultaneously or in tandem.[8] This finding suggests that bringing rules to conscious awareness can impair the effective utilization of subconscious language routines. Second, there may be a natural order of acquisition for language structures that is uncorrelated with the order in which they are taught. Krashen has provided a review of investigations in which the order of appearance of grammatical features for second language learners has been investigated.[9] In general there is a high degree of consistency among adults in the order of appearance of particular grammatical structures. When comparisons can be made, there is also a high degree of uniformity among speakers of different languages.[10] These findings suggest that there is a natural order in the acquisition of language structures for second language learners, as has been observed for first language learners. Of particular interest is that this natural order prevails although it does not correspond to the order in which grammatical structures are taught in the classroom. One explanation for this natural order of grammatical structures is that language acquisition is a creative process largely governed by implicit problem-solving mechanisms independent of conscious monitoring and learning.

Teaching procedures of the comprehension approach focus on strategies that encourage implicit or nonconscious language learning. It is reasoned that implicit processing will effectively lead to nucleation. The major method involves providing comprehensible input, that students can easily understand.[11] In this approach, the student may derive grammatical structures without conscious awareness by listening to sentences presented in meaningful contexts.

The premise that teaching language through comprehension is effective was first introduced by Asher, whose experiments,[12] along with those of other investigators,[13] provided evidence that acquisition is rapid in the beginning stages of language learning. No experiments have been conducted which demonstrate conclusively the superiority of the comprehension approach. However, we will report the results of an experiment which do demonstrate considerable success with this approach over a period equivalent to two years of college study.

A second premise of the comprehension approach is that speaking should not be taught—it will develop as the individual acquires knowledge of the foreign language. Speech development seems to lag behind comprehension.[14] This developmental sequence (first comprehension, then speech) occurs in first language acquisition as well as in second language acquisition if it takes place in the environment of the second language.

Unlike other methods of language instruction, the comprehension approach does not change this natural relationship between comprehension and production by forcing students to speak at the outset. Exercises such as dialogue memorization, conversation practice, recall of isolated words, words in sentences or full narratives, and imitation drills are not used as teaching techniques prior to nucleation.

In the comprehension approach, speaking is not given attention directly. At first students will say little since their attention is on comprehending the language they hear. Gradually, as they begin to understand the second language, they will say single words and short sentences, although their pronunciation and grammatical usage may not be correct. What they say is not ignored, however, as the instructor responds appropriately to the communicative intent of each utterance.

Within the context of comprehension training, the amount and complexity of student speech gradually increases. The teacher must be willing to accept errors without correcting them, responding in a communicative

way to each effort. Student speech does not dominate the classroom. Prior to nucleation, the total amount of verbal output by the students usually does not exceed 20 percent, and it does not even reach this level until the later stages. In the beginning we recommend that students' entire attention be focused on listening. We have found that they begin to talk at different times, and the amount they say will vary somewhat. They usually begin to talk when they are able to retrieve words and generate sentences without effort. The comprehension approach provides the setting for speaking to develop spontaneously.

During the prenucleation stages, speaking is not practiced or forced because students need to hear sounds and words many times before they can say them correctly. When they speak prematurely, incorrect pronunciation and grammatical patterns will be heard by other students who may very well acquire them.

A third premise of the comprehension approach is that vocabulary acquisition is a critical dimension in learning a foreign language. Sentences cannot be comprehended unless the words within them are understood. It is often said that students can function effectively in a foreign language with a few thousand words; we estimate that an adult speaker requires at least 15,000 to 20,000 in order to express mature concepts well.

Specific techniques used in the comprehension approach have been presented in great detail elsewhere.[15] Some traditional teaching techniques may be used, though at different stages. In the postnucleation stage of comprehension training, students prepare speeches and write themes. The instructor corrects errors in pronunciation, grammar, and idiomatic usage. However, at this point they are like American students in an average high school English class. When they receive instruction in pronunciation or in the use of certain grammatical expressions, they are able to focus their attention on errors because they have already acquired a sophisticated understanding of English. Educated speakers of English do the same with regard to structures such as "whom," "none is," and "It is he." Conscious monitoring of a limited number of rules or expressions does not seriously disturb the automatic processing of language in the postnucleation stage.

During the last few years many writers have commented on the difficulty of modifying interlanguage errors, errors that individuals produce after nucleation has taken place.[16] It is possible that many of these errors

are maintained for the following reasons: 1. Students are forced to speak before they have had sufficient auditory exposure to the language, and a full understanding of its underlying phonology has not been acquired. 2. Students consciously use grammatical rules, often applying them incorrectly and too generally. 3. Students derive implicitly incorrect grammatical rules because they have not had sufficient exposure to the second language. It is of interest to note that in first language acquisition and for young children acquiring a second language, none of the above appears to apply. Children are not forced to speak, nor are they given speaking exercises. Instead, children's language usage reflects what they understand, and the speech that is requested from them usually reflects what their parents and caretakers assume they understand. Also, grammatical rules are not taught to native language learners or to young second language learners and, therefore, incorrect use of an editorial monitor is not a consideration. Finally, it is generally recognized that first language learners and young second language learners have the opportunity to hear an almost unlimited number of utterances as they are acquiring language.

Stages of Language Training

In our model of language instruction, teaching is divided into the prenucleation and the postnucleation stages. Each of these stages has a beginning and an intermediate phase.

Prenucleation Stages of Training

The beginning or initial phase consists of 200 hours of comprehension training; the intermediate stage may consist of up to about 800 hours of training.

The Beginning Stage. The most critical period of comprehension training is the initial stage. Students must be prepared emotionally and intellectually and the staff must adjust the moods and learning styles of students' diverse personalities to a methodology of silent yet meaningful class participation. Such a beginning course places demands on one instructor, and therefore, we recommend that two teach the intensive course sequence.

In addition to the personal commitment of multiple-hour classes, the staff must adhere to the following set of guidelines.

1. At the outset of the course, teachers' utterances should not exceed seven words.
2. Single words and expressions are to be repeated frequently, making eye contact with several different individuals.
3. When directing students to engage in an activity, keep the commands or directions short; do not give any one student more than three. If the student fails to perform the task as directed, have another carry it out. Then "reenter" the first student with an accomplishable activity so that he or she has a successful experience.
4. Instructor-to-instructor talk should occur continually.
5. Instructors should not perform an activity that a student can do.
6. Responses to incidental activities (sneezing, spilling coffee) are worthwhile—they are learning situations.
7. When a student begins to speak, in sounds, words, or phrases, errors will occur. Do not blot out the message by direct correction; paraphrase correct forms confirming the comprehension of the message.
8. Begin new activities with a brief introduction.
9. Students attempting early speech participation should be acknowledged, but not encouraged. Otherwise, we believe students cease to listen carefully, and rather spend time silently formulating responses and rehearsing their rejoinders.
10. Language activities are "doing activities" and they require relevant kinetic participation by the student. The activity or task is the goal, language is but a strategy to accomplish the objective.

In all instances the target language must be concise, simplified, and repetitive. Visible clues and physical cues directed at the student as well as concrete objects are vital elements of what we term "paralanguage." Without this the comprehension approach could not be carried out. The formulaic expressions (yes/no, salutations) are acceptable low-level intrusions on the students' "code of silence." Indeed, these automatic responses help some students impose silence upon themselves. Nonlinear learning—the relative unimportance of ordering surface grammatical items such as articles and pronouns both in learning tasks and in evaluation—become accepted as the "natural" order of acquisition.[17]

In our intensive language program conducted in the summer of 1983, we set up a series of "modules," most about twenty minutes long. Longer modules would be preceded and followed by shorter ones involving a higher level of student kinetic energy. Each module reestablished and validated the notion that language, when being studied, is not to be studied. Language is the medium through which objectives are met and tasks are performed. An activity may be as simple as the cataloging of boxes into which shoes are placed, or as complex as a chalkboard/slide lecture of Munich, comparing that city with our own.

Space for performing the various modules exceeds the limits of a traditional classroom. We found that a vacant university-owned home of some 2,000 square feet provided room for stimluating activities without impairing individuals' needs for comfort and "private space" or imposing a sense of confinement.

After a brief review of the course, the first order of business was to establish rapport with students. German greetings and introductions and handshaking were modeled with nodding, non-personal touching, and faculty recall of names. Each student created a personalized name tag caricature. The faculty filled the air with reinforcing commentary that involved eye contact and comprehension of the *Sie* (you) form. The tags themselves then served as visuals.

The tasks we devised are as follows: introduction of vocabulary via unambiguous noun pictures attached to a wall board, completion of an agenda, map work, preparation of lunches, introduction of nouns represented by toys or real objects, directed physical response tasks done as recess or "playground" activities, and housekeeping chores. In addition, students enjoyed letter-number identification of the noun pictures on the wallboard, geography, games such as Math-Memory, and a surprise 21st birthday party for a student. The surprise as well as playing games associated with elementary school children's get-togethers personalized the activities. Other activities were folkdancing, making coffee, a retelling of "Rotkappchen" (Little Red Riding Hood), a sequence of planned presentations on German-speaking lands and customs, German television commercials, tours of public places such as museums, selected programs of the "Guten Tag in Deutschland" television series, weather and time-telling activities, string and knot tying. Some activities were repeated, with modifications in the density and complexity of the spoken language

accompanying them, as well as changes in vocabulary. For evening homework the students listened to about one hour of a programmed audiovisual tape series with corresponding picture books entitled *The Learnables*.[16]

Teachers observed that the students understood almost everything that was said to them as they completed tasks and carried out directives of increasing complexity. Phrases became sentences, and sentences commentaries. Linguistic sophistication and comprehension were growing.

After the first 50 hours it was noted that physical activities not accompanied by great amounts of language input were judged to be insufficiently challenging. Students insisted upon large chunks of language, and consequently, modules shifted perceptibly to a more sophisticated plane. German cultural information was extremely helpful at this juncture. Personalities were discussed—writers, artists, politicians, scientists, as well as an occasional literary work. At this point modules such as the following were presented: fractions, drawing pictorial representations of sounds, a visit to a department store to organize a vacation packing list, airport activities, map reading skills, chemistry demonstrations and experiments, and slide shows.

At this same time there was a perceptible increase in the number and variety of responses which students volunteered. Rather than reliance upon a noun followed by a *yes* or *no*, one heard definite articles, interrogatives, the use of *kein* (*no* as adjective), adjectives, and noun strings. Verbs occurred infrequently, and usually in an unconjugated form. We surmised that our students were probing us for tacit permission to begin speaking. Most importantly, the students were creating original utterances in order to communicate.

We were elated to find that comprehension training was producing unsolicited intelligible speech. Although our earlier findings and hypotheses had led us to expect this result, we were still surprised by the emerging facility students displayed as well as their apparent ease in reproducing the sounds of German with appropriate accents.

Our experience with college students had led us to believe that about 200 hours must be spent on the beginning stage of language comprehension training. In this stage a vocabulary of about 2,000 words is learned and simple sentences can be understood. Only a small number of abstractions or concepts are understood. The verb system is poorly grasped. Students do not discern case endings or grammatical categories

distinguished by affixes. They perform poorly on traditional standardized language tests of grammar and translation skills. However, their performance does not reflect their progress in comprehension.

What do the 200 hours of comprehension training translate into in terms of student hours? In an American high school with one class hour per day for 40 weeks, the beginning stage would take the full first year. In an American college, one could not complete the beginning stage in one year unless a full five hours per week were devoted to the language class. Extending class time for college students is not difficult if homework is reduced or if credit is increased.

However, there is a problem more serious than the number of contact hours. It pertains to goals and expectations in the comprehension class. Students and teachers must both recognize that explicit knowledge of grammatical structures is not to be acquired. Nor will the students achieve more than a minimal degree of proficiency in reading. However, the students will understand simple sentences at a normal conversational rate, and will be prepared to enter the intermediate stage of language training.

The Intermediate Stage. The goal of the intermediate phase involves a somewhat different emphasis. The command modules and complex activity modules are reduced in scope, but still continue. Emphasis is placed on understanding complex sentences, abstract concepts, and about 10,000 lexical items. Speech is encouraged, but not required. Grammatical rules are not taught, and reading by students constituted 20 percent of the instructional time.

How long is the intermediate stage of language training? There is insufficient research to answer this question for, in essence, it asks: How long does nucleation take? We do not know at this point. If we were to guess how much meaningful, comprehensible input is required for nucleation to develop, we would say that the range is somewhere between 800 and 1,000 hours. This estimate is based on our experience with programs and institutes outside the United States in which comprehension is the primary method of language instruction.

In the intermediate stage, the complexity of input is increased. In the individual activity modules, sentences are paraphrased in related sentences, concepts are redefined and reiterated until all listeners indicate comprehension. Students are encouraged to comment spontaneously, and to express their opinions. Their syntax is allowed to flow freely without

constant correction by the instructor. The instructor often restates the utterance in corrected form, either to seek clarification or to express a point. Of course correction of errors is given when requested by the student.

The learning environment for the third semester of comprehension training (at the Univerity of Missouri-Kansas City) was a room in a converted family dwelling containing chairs, a blackboard, movable table, and bulletin board. There was also an adjoining kitchen. The students met for two hours three times per week with two instructors. Every third class meeting was spent in the home of an instructor, a natural environment which enhanced the authenticity of the communicaton process.

A positive interpersonal relationship had been established between students and instructors. Each class was begun with personal greetings, comments about appearance, demeanor or perceived mood, followed by a handshake or other physical contact. The students always displayed a high level of motivation, and they were rarely absent from class.

Reading was taught in the following way. The teacher read each passage aloud, stopping after each sentence. Each new vocabulary item was defined, and several new sentences were given in which the word was used. The story also served as a point of discussion.

An example of one of the short stories presented in German, the target language, is presented below:

> *One day a prosperous businessman with a nice family and a good income returned home early from work. He was quite ill. His wife, a journalist for a newspaper, was not at home. When she returned home, he told her how ill he felt. They discussed it, and he decided to see a doctor the next morning. He could not get an appointment right away. The next week he saw the doctor. When he returned home, his wife had left for New York on assignment. When she returned a few days later, he told her he was ill with cancer and would soon die. He was 40 years of age. Do you think that he is too young to die? How would you feel in his shoes? What would you do?*

Excerpts from *Deutsche Kulturgeschichte*[9] were also read aloud by the instructor who paraphrased each new abstract word until students understood. Words and idioms were also explained through pantomime.

Other modules involved card games, slide presentations, polishing silver and copper, preparing party foods, cleaning windows, ironing shirts in successive steps, painting a kitchen ceiling, disassembling and crating

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a table for shipment, discussions of paintings and posters, and excursions to a bank, cemetery, delicatessen, used car dealership, filling station, pharmacy, import store, and an inner city neighborhood. In each case as one instructor commented on the physical environment, the second instructor or teaching assistant noted the new words. New words were defined, paraphrased or presented in new sentences in German. At the next session the students were given a typed sheet on which each new word was presented in two or three sentences. This written material provided an important reading experience for the students. The complexity of the instructor's explanations, definitions, and sentences increased proportionately with the comprehension level of the students.

Comprehension testing of old and new material was done informally through questions or commands. Formal testing was done by presenting 10 to 15 sentences in written form with one word omitted. The students' task was to fill in the missing word from several listed below the text.

Postnucleation Stages of Training

The experimental investigation which we conducted was concluded after a little more than 400 hours, so our suggestions for postnucleation language training are based on theory rather than on experience. Postnucleation training has several important aims: 1. Reducing errors that continue to persist in speaking. 2. Increasing students' understanding of the literature, government, and history of the countries in which the foreign language is spoken. 3. Teaching various styles of writing. 4. Teaching a specialized vocabulary for a discipline or profession when requested by the students. Items 1 and 2 are emphasized in the early stage, and items 3 and 4 in the intermediate stage of postnucleation training.

There are no special procedures that are particular to the postnucleation phase. The teaching of reading and writing can be taught according to traditional formats because students already have the linguistic skills to benefit from these procedures.

Direct correction, which is seldom used by instructors in the prenucleation stages, causes little harm in the postnucleation stage as long as it is presented in a nonthreatening manner. However, an error learned because the teaching format encouraged speaking and the use of a conscious monitor to acquire rules, may be extremely difficult to eradicate.

On the other hand, errors that persist because the individual has not acquired implicitly the correct rule in the prenucleation period may be fairly easy to eliminate.

An approach which focuses on the meaning of the learner's errors may be more successful than direct correction of errors in conversation. In this approach, the teacher records errors over a period of time and later discusses them with each student, pointing out how errors often convey an unintended meaning.

Results of German Comprehension Program

None of the 18 students who participated in the intensive German language comprehension program in the summer of 1983 had high school or college background in German. The course involved five to six hours of activities per day for eight and a half weeks. At the completion of the summer program students had received 210 hours of class time. Students averaged another 40 hours of listening time with the supplementary cassette series *The Learnables*.[50] They earned eight semester hours of credit.

All 18 students were tested with the 1983 American Association of Teachers of German (AATG) Level 3 examination.[51] They achieved a mean score of 34 (10th percentile), whereas a group of 13 students who had completed one full year of German at the same institution achieved an average score of 43 (25th percentile). The difference between the two groups was significant, indicating that the standard grammar translation approach produced better results than the comprehension approach. These results were largely anticipated as students of the comprehension approach are not expected to do well on tests of reading and grammar in the early phases of learning.

Seven of the 18 students from the summer program continued the comprehension training program in the fall of 1983. At the conclusion of this period, the students averaged 96 additional in-class hours, or a total of 306 hours of training. Homework during this time was restricted to reading exemplar sentences for new vocabulary items. Students indicated that they averaged about two hours of study time per week. These seven students, who had received an average score of 35 on the AATG third-year examination at the conclusion of the summer program, now averaged 51,

which is a percentile score of 41. Thus, the third-semester students were performing below average on a standardized examination designed for third-year high school students. But these students performed better than another group with an additional semester of training even though they received no instruction in grammar, and instruction in reading accounted for about 20 percent of the total class time.

Three of the seven and two other students with traditional backgrounds received 96 hours of instruction in the spring semester, 1984. For the three students who had remained in the program the total amount of in-class instructional time was 402 hours. Of the original group of 18 students in the summer of 1983, these three presented an average profile of performance (their average score on the summer test was 33, one point below the average score of 34 for all 18 students). The homework and the time spent on it were similar to that of the previous semester. On classroom tests of comprehension the three students performed well. The students took the AATG 1984 fourth-year high school examination.[12] They achieved an average score of 60 which is the 37th percentile value for students who have completed four years of high school German. Without explicit study of grammar they accomplished the equivalent of four years of high school German in four semesters of college comprehension training. In listening and speaking our impression is that they performed significantly above four-year high school students who receive instruction according to the traditional grammar-translation format. The students spoke spontaneously and without hesitation, although errors were frequent, had a large vocabulary, and were highly motivated to continue the study of German.

We do not know what the effect would be of an additional 600 hours of German language input. Our belief is that sometime before the students have received a total of 1,000 hours of input they will nucleate, at which point their scores on traditional tests of reading and grammar should be high.

Our investigation demonstrates that grammar does not need to be taught explicitly for students to do well on tests of grammar and reading, nor does vocabulary have to be taught through translation, since we observed that about 400 hours of comprehensible listening enabled students to score at the 37th percentile of the four-year AATG test.

Summary

Teaching through comprehension is a relatively new approach to foreign language instruction. In this chapter its theoretical background and methodology have been described. In particular, training procedures for teaching language comprehension at the prenucleation and postnucleation stages were presented. Additionally, an investigation in which the comprehension method of instruction was used indicated that students who had had four semesters of college German, amounting to 400 hours of in-class time, scored at the 37th percentile on the 1984 AATG fourth-year high school examination. They achieved this level of performance without explicit study of grammar and without translation of vocabulary items. It was suggested that comprehension training should be continued for about 1,000 hours in order to prepare students for emphasis in the traditional skills of literary reading, composition, and, if they wish, specialized vocabulary.

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